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ABSTRACT

The "Voices of Love and Freedom" project uses current children's literature to help children connect with their teachers and classmates in a personal way while teaching children ethical decision making skills, multicultural understanding, and literacy. The model also provides teachers with an easily understandable method for integrating subjects using real books about real issues. The teacher shares a personal story with the students and then reads an applicable story to them. A collaborative group of researchers from Memphis (Tennessee) City Schools, the Center for Research in Educational Policy, and the University of Memphis's College of Education evaluated the first year's implementation of the project at Oakhaven Elementary School in Memphis. While it is still too early to reach conclusive results, preliminary indications are that the project approach has the potential to significantly reduce the amount of violence and friction in schools. For instance, the number of students disciplined for fighting dropped dramatically. In addition, "Voices for Love and Freedom" has been a catalyst within the school to focus faculty, staff and students on thinking about and expanding alternative choices to violent behavior. Some of the findings have also affected the way the school's principal thinks about student achievement. A detailed description of how this project got underway at Oakhaven shows that it is a complex undertaking and one that takes more than one school year to implement. (Author/TB)

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"Assessment of an Intervention Addressing Literacy and Ethics"

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Abstract

The "Voices of Love and Freedom" project uses current children's literature to help children connect with their teachers and classmates in a personal way while teaching children ethical decision making skills, multicultural understanding, and literacy. The model also provides teachers with an easily understandable method for integrating subjects using real books about real issues. A collaborative of researchers from Memphis City Schools, the Center for Research in Educational Policy, and The University of Memphis's College of Education evaluated the first year's implementation of "Voices of Love and Freedom" at Oakhaven Elementary School, Memphis, Tennessee. This paper presents a principal's utilization of research findings to assist in implementation and expansion of this project.

"Assessment of an Intervention Addressing Literacy and Ethics"

As a new principal in August of 1992, I began my quest for understanding of the Oakhaven School/Community with one-on-one interviews with each teacher. Questions addressed each of the major goals that the State Department of Education was holding schools responsible for improving: attendance, academic achievement, promotion, parent involvement. Also included were questions about personal interests and the perceived deficiencies in the school. In 99% of the response, discipline (or lack thereof) was the number-one deficiency identified.

We also administered a comprehensive community survey that was created using questions submitted by faculty, parents, and administrative staff. As no survey of this nature was available through the local Board of Education, this survey was a make-shift attempt to sample the community's opinions. We distributed this survey at the Open House in the fall of 1992. One hundred sixty-five parents responded. The survey asked questions about each of the major goals generated by the State Department of Education but also included questions about demographics, school finance, and discipline (as it was the major concern of the teachers).

As a fervent advocate of the elimination of corporal punishment in schools, I wanted to see if the community would support alternatives to the practice. Eighty-three parents said they would support corporal punishment in the school; 17 said they would not. However, 94 parents stated that they would rather have alternatives to corporal punishment; 7 said they would not. This gave me the go-ahead to seek alternatives.

During the next two years, intensive staff development centering around all issues concerning discipline was conducted. As principal, I engaged in personal professional development about anything and everything dealing with violence prevention that did not include corporal punishment. It was during this time that I came across a symposium being conducted at Harvard University entitled "Innovative Practices and Programs for Children at Risk." It was at this conference that I was first introduced to the "Voices of Love and

Freedom" project. The project was developed by University of Massachusetts professor Dr. Pat Walker in collaboration with Harvard University's Dr. Bob Selman.

The "Voices of Love and Freedom" project uses current children's literature to help children connect with their teachers and classmates in a personal way while teaching children ethical decision making skills, multicultural understanding, and literacy. The model also provides teachers with an easily understandable method for integrating subjects using real books about real issues. I saw this as a very do-able program and wanted very much to have this project at Oakhaven as a primary violence prevention strategy. After all, according to all the literature on "risk factors" for violence, primary determinants of violent behavior are (a) the lack of personal connection between child and adult, (b) low literacy rate, (c) the inability to take another person's perspective, and (d) limited understanding of strategies for solving problems. The "Voices" model addressed all of these issues. As the project was so new in the Boston area, preliminary research results were very sketchy. At this time, I talked to Dr. Walker about a training institute. He said that they were working on one and would notify me as to the dates. It would probably be in the summer.

What exactly does the "Voices of Love and Freedom" model look like? It is very simple and usable, yet it reaches the most complex of human relations issues. At the beginning of each lesson, the teacher connects with students by sharing a personal story that relates to the issue that is addressed in the storybook and gets students to share similar stories with each other and the group.

Next, the teacher reads the story to students without showing them the pictures, thereby fostering individual mental imaging. The reading of the story is very important and should be done in story-teller fashion. Following the reading, students are engaged in a discussion about the issue in the story, with the teacher asking high-level and open-ended questions. Teachers are not to give value judgements regarding student responses, but to reflect what students have said as a way of validation.

The next component is to practice appropriate methods of addressing the issue in the story. This can be done as a whole class by having students act as various characters in the story and allowing the other students in the class to question them about their behavior. It can be done by having students pair and discuss the issue or role-play and take different perspectives.

The final segment is to express what has been done during the practice component or what has been learned during the lesson. Students can write stories or poems, draw pictures, orally present, make videos, or prepare anything that is portfolio-worthy and draws together the learning. In my opinion, this was a human relations approach to teaching multicultural awareness, decision making, and literacy.

I returned to Memphis like Socrates' man out of the cave. After presenting the project to the faculty and a parent group, it was decided that we would write a grant proposal that would allow staff persons to be trained in "Voices of Love and Freedom" methodology.

Realizing that, with the Boston "Voices" project, research had in some areas been an afterthought, I invited Dr. E. Dean Butler, director of the Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP), and Mr. Lou Franceschini, a researcher with the Department of Research Services in Memphis City Schools (MCS), to meet with me to discuss a possible collaborative. What I wanted was both qualitative and quantitative support that the "Voices" project was actually improving student's ethical decision making skills, literacy, and multicultural understanding. Actually, bottom line, were students becoming less violent as a result of exposure to this program?

The result of this meeting was a multi-modal research triangulation between CREP staff, College of Education personnel, and MCS Research Services personnel. Research projects addressed the following: students' perceptions of friction/cohesiveness; teachers' perceptions of school climate; teacher interviews during all phases of beginning implementation; administrative interviews during all phases of beginning implementation;

administration of the Pro-Social Attitude Blank to assess students' knowledge of alternatives to inappropriate behavior in social situations; analysis of student writing samples; and analysis of the actual disciplinary referrals over a two-year period. These were just the kinds of data that I needed to determine the effectiveness of the project and to include in grant proposals that would insure funding.

A grant of $5,000 was approved by the school system, but when the actual cost came down from Dr. Walker, we found we needed additional funds. Our staff functioned by grade level committees and other committees that were composed by grade level representatives. We believed that to be fully implemented, grade level representatives should be trained along with the guidance counselor, myself, the assistant principal, and the Orff Music teacher (who works with all of the children).

We wrote additional proposals to The University of Memphis and MCS's Division of Curriculum and Instruction and were able to obtain the remainder of the funding. In July of 1993, thirteen Oakhaven Elementary staff persons were in Concord, Massachusetts, receiving intensive training in both utilizing the "Voices of Love and Freedom" model and also developing curriculum for themselves. The trip also had a very important ancillary result, the nature of the "Voices" model fosters personal connections among all participants. We returned to Memphis as a cohesive team calling ourselves "The Green Stone Club" after the book by Alice Walker titled Finding the Green Stone.

The group met at my home in August to discuss how we would implement this program in the school. Dr. Butler from The University of Memphis and Mr. Franceschini from Research Services were also present at this meeting to determine the types of data that we wanted and the direction that the pilot would take in terms of day-to-day operations. As a group, we decided that we would pilot the project in the individual classrooms during the first semester and each teacher would mentor one other teacher the second semester. We would use a teacher trainer model where the novice teacher would observe several times before the trained teacher observes the novice.

We also decided that we didn't want to use a pure sample approach by trying to keep the same students together each year and allowing them to progress through each grade in classrooms where the originally trained teachers could continuously expose them to the model. Our objective, we felt, was to expose as many students to the model as possible hoping for the overall results to be a less violent and, therefore, safer school. Although the "pure sample" approach might have been better for research purposes to prove that "Voices" was the variable impacting these students, the group declined this approach out of concern for the greater good. As a school principal, I realized that school personnel objectives frequently counter "good research practices."

During the first year, we met with a number of setbacks beginning with the fact that the curriculum guides from Boston didn't arrive until November. Since the original enthusiasm had waned somewhat, it was January before many teachers actually were teaching "Voices" lessons each week. I asked that each teacher commit to teaching one lesson per week in lieu of the Language Arts lesson. We met monthly to discuss progress/drawbacks and for researchers from The University of Memphis and Memphis City Schools to conduct research projects and any results that they might have along the way. In March, I began my observations of teachers conducting the lessons and gave informal feedback. Researchers observed teachers after I had conducted my initial observations because I wanted to make sure that they were comfortable and successful with the model before "outsiders" came in to observe. This is another example where school practices and research practices may not mesh. We would not be able to begin the teacher-trainer model to expand the project until the following year.

Meanwhile, in spring of 1994, Dr. Walker and I presented the model to Memphis City Schools teachers and administrators at the Multicultural Awareness Symposium and generated a great deal of interest in the project system-wide as evidenced in the evaluations of the presentation. In the summer of 1994, Dr. Walker, Ms. Kim Archung, Mr. Franceschini, and I presented the project to principals at the Memphis City Schools

Principal's Safety Symposium. Seventeen principals requested the training for their schools after hearing about the implementation and preliminary research results. To date, there is still no commitment from the school system to provide an institute for individual schools that want to implement a program similar to the one at Oakhaven, but we haven't given up hope and we believe that this will come in the near future.

How has research had utility for me as a principal? Even though my original research into the Oakhaven Community was biased -- teachers would feel intimidated somewhat during interviews with the principal, and only concerned parents go to Open House, which is where the original Parent Survey was conducted -- the results of these assessments led me to problem identification and gave me the latitude to explore alternatives that related to student discipline.

Preliminary research results from The University of Memphis for the 1993-94 school year have led me to believe that although at this time we can't say conclusively that "Voices of Love and Freedom" reduces violent behavior, we can say that it is a catalyst within a school to focus faculty, staff, and students on thinking about and expanding alternative choices to violent behavior. Some of the findings also have had an impact on how I think about student achievement and the expansion of this project at Oakhaven.

Of the eight top scoring classrooms on the TCAP, which is the standardized testing program used in Tennessee, three of the teachers were "Voices" teachers. One of those teachers' classes scored signficantly above the others within that grade level (and in the school system) and significantly above his previous class (the class prior to his training in "Voices"). CREP research related to Teachers' Construction of Efficacy indicated that this teacher's perceived role was one of fostering relationships within the classroom. He was the only "Voices" teacher who viewed himself in this way. This indicated to me that the real key to teaching a "Voices" lesson is in the relationships that we foster in the classroom and not necessarily in the amount of time spent on rote memorization.

Research conducted by University of Memphis faculty member Dr. Becky Anderson using teacher interviews indicated that there are certain teacher personalities that lend themselves more easily to this approach to teaching. It also indicated that the "Voices" model gives teachers a vehicle to move more into a new way of teaching thematically and of assessing authentically. Also, her research provided information about the comfort level of teachers during implementation. Teachers felt as if they needed more continual support during implementation in addition to the monthly meetings and observation feedback. This had ramifications for the way we were to expand the project during the 1994-95 school year.

Based on the research, it was decided that in addition to meeting once per month, trained teachers would serve as mentors to teachers who volunteered to be trained. These novice teachers also would select which teacher would be their mentor. We felt this would increase their comfort level and their ability to learn from a peer. Our monthly meetings would serve two purposes: first, to talk about experiences and secondly, to explain each component of the lesson one at a time. Instead of novice teachers observing an entire lesson, they would focus on one component at a time. They would observe twice and be observed one time before moving on to the next component. Twenty teachers volunteered to be trained, and we developed a schedule using our instructional assistants to provide release time. By the end of the 1994-95 school year, thirty classroom teachers will be able to implement the model.

Preliminary results from the Pro-Social Attitude Blank, developed by Ms. Rebecca Wasson of CREP, indicated that children can be taught to be less violent. The research also showed that there may be developmental periods when a child is more responsive to learning alternatives to violent behavior. This tells me that we should continue with all of our non-violent disciplinary interventions including teaching conflict resolution in classrooms.

Preliminary results from the research conducted by Mr. Franceschini using the "My Class Inventory" indicated that within the "Voices of Love and Freedom" classrooms as compared with similar schools in the system and with our own school in 1984, students in the "Voices" classes perceived less friction in their classrooms. With the startling increase in school violence and the rising opinion that schools are unsafe places, these youngsters are, for whatever reason, not perceiving their classrooms to be as fraught with friction as students in comparison classrooms.

In analyzing the discipline data, the number of students engaging in violent behavior went dramatically down from the first year of my tenure (1992-93) to the second (1993-94). Students disciplined once for fighting in 1992-93 numbered over 300. In 1993-94, that number was reduced to 175. Students disciplined twice for fighting in 1992-93 numbered 73; in 1993-94, that number was 59. Students disciplined three times for fighting in 1993-94 numbered 36; in 1993-94, that number was 15. In other words, during 1993-94, in 216 fewer instances, students resorted to violence in resolving conflict.

In seeking out research concerning "Voices of Love and Freedom", what I <u>wanted</u> was <u>support</u>; what I learned was that an evaluation of one year's implementation process was not sufficient to make any definitive appraisal. In summary, while this data is not conclusive that "Voices of Love and Freedom" is the key to violence reduction in schools, the findings certainly support the continuation of the project as one of the components of a viable violence prevention program. The research component did alter implementation plans for the 1994-95 school year. More concern will be taken with the teacher support system and the amount of information that teachers must assimilate at one setting.

The members of the research team also learned something. That a principal's primary concern is with the children, next the teachers, and last with researchers.